DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 952 PS 029 061

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TITLE Early Childhood Development and School Readiness: Some Observations about "Homework" for New Century Working Parents.
PUB DATE 2000-09-22
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Voices for Illinois Conference (Chicago, IL, September 22, 2000).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Blacks; Child Development; Cultural Influences; *Emergent Literacy; Employed Parents; Family Environment; Parent Child Relationship; Parent Role; *Parents; *Parents as Teachers; Reading Instruction; *School Readiness; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans; Illinois

ABSTRACT

This keynote address examines the relationship between early childhood development and school readiness. The address begins with basic statistical data indicative of the well-being of children in Pennsylvania and Illinois and maintains that advocacy embracing and encouraging interdisciplinary professional collaboration for supporting and empowering parents is needed in both states. The address further discusses the relationship between early childhood development and school readiness, focusing on the contribution of the family home environment to young children's academic and social skills. It is noted that research since the 1960s has affirmed the importance of early parent-child relationships to children's school readiness. Increased collaboration since the 1960s has led to an improved understanding of the interconnections between a young child's physical and psychological status at home, in the family, and performance in the primary grades at school. The recent expansion of Head Start services allows educators to reach more children in poverty prior to school entry than ever before. However, the address argues, parents must be empowered to feel full responsibility for their children's literacy development and school readiness, and to use the skill and knowledge of teachers and others to make their responsibility concrete. It is asserted that it is time for African American parents to assume responsibility, as Asian American parents do, for teaching their own children to read before they go to elementary school. (Contains 22 references.) (KB)

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ED 447 952

Start Early: Learning Begins at Birth

BUILDING SCHOOL READINESS CONFERENCE

THE STANDARD CLUB, CHICAGO, IL.,

SEPTEMBER 22, 2000

KEYNOTE ADDRESS:

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND SCHOOL READINESS: SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT "HOMEWORK" FOR NEW CENTURY WORKING PARENTS

BY

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Diana T. Slaughter-Defoe

First, Barbara Bowman, I thank you so very much for that warm, gracious, and generous introduction. Second, I thank the organizers and co-sponsors of this Building School Readiness Conference, Voices for Illinois Children, Inc., in conjunction with the Ounce of Prevention and Family Focus, Inc., and Erikson Institute for graciously extending the invitation for me to speak to this audience of persons who care deeply about the health and achievements of this nation's children generally, and of children in the state of Illinois in particular.

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Third, I also extend a special thank you to Joan Vitale, Brenda Baker, Renee Dolezal, and Jerome Stermer for being among those who so generously gave of their time to help me learn more about the important work of Voices for Illinois Children when I briefly visited last month, and for doing all they could possibly do to ensure my comfort while here. I know that I am only the third speaker to address this audience, and I am very sensitive to the significance of this organization for the healthy growth and development of young children. For these reasons, I am particularly appreciative of the confidence that the co-conveners of the conference had in me and in the possibility that I can and will address issues of special significance.

Chicago is my birthplace, and I have lived, attended school, and worked in Chicago or the Chicago area (Evanston) for the majority of my childhood and adult life. Therefore, it is a special privilege to have been invited to speak--I have not forgotten Chicago since moving to Philadelphia in 1998, and I am pleased to know that Chicago has not forgotten me.

Fourth, I express my sincere appreciation to the fiscal supporters of this multi-year public educational initiative: the McCormick Tribune Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Harris Foundation, and the Community Memorial Foundation. This important initiative emerged relatively recently in Chicago, though it has been needed for some time. The wisdom and foresight of individuals positioned in these foundations have, at long last, transformed this need into a reality. I am sure there are many

wonderful and provocative stories about that process of transformation, and I hope to learn about some of them someday.

Fifth, I am appreciative of this morning's panel moderator and members with whom I will spend time after my keynote address--from all indications, each one of these thoughtful individuals is devoted to the welfare of Illinois' children and families. I regard it as a distinct honor to have the pleasure of knowing each of these individuals better.

Finally, I also thank all the conference attendees who have come in early this morning from their homes or workplaces in order to participate from the beginning in this important campaign, one so vital to children's well-being. I especially appreciate the friends and colleagues who arranged to spend time here this morning. I know there are many competing time demands, so I am grateful for your decision to be present at the Conference.

I think this is the moment for me to say to the entire audience: "Good morning, thank you for coming, and I hope you each have a nice day today!"

State-Wide Economic Characteristics and Indicators of Child Well-Being

At the outset, let me state that I believe I do understand some of the context in which the majority of persons in this audience are working, partly as a result of having examined some recent statistics provided by KIDS COUNT (The Illinois' contact for this service is, in fact, Voices for Illinois Children). Thanks to KIDS COUNT'S very useful on-line data (www.aecf.org), I quickly updated my information about the status of Illinois children.

Actually, it seems that on critical issues of child well-being, Illinois and my current home state of Pennsylvania have similar statistics. For example, in 1997 the percent of low birth-weight babies in Illinois was 7.9%; the percent in Pennsylvania was 7.6%. The percent of children in poverty was 18% in Illinois; in Pennsylvania the rate was 17%. The percent of children under age 5 in poverty in 1996 was 20% in Illinois; in Pennsylvania the rate was 19%. In Illinois, the percent of families with children headed by a single parent in 1997 was 27%. Similarly, in Pennsylvania, the rate was 25%. In Illinois, the percent of children under age 6 living with working parents was 68%; in Pennsylvania this rate was 65%. The percent of children living with parents who do not have full-time, year-round employment was 26% in both states.

However, in Illinois, no information was available for the percent of fourth grade students scoring below basic reading level in 1998, nor below basic mathematics level in 1996. In Pennsylvania the information was also not available for reading, although the figure for mathematics was 32%. The percent of teens, ages 16-19 who were high school dropouts was 9% in Illinois, and 8% in Pennsylvania. Experience has taught me that the figures on high school drop out status should always be doubled, for African American and Latino American populations. For example, according to KIDS COUNT, in 1999 ". . .20 percent of Hispanic teens were high school dropouts, compared to 7 percent of white teens and 13 percent of African American teens. . ." (KIDS COUNT 2000, p.

29).[1]

There were some noticeable differences between the two states. For example, in 1997, the Illinois infant mortality rate was 8.4 deaths per 1000 live births; in Pennsylvania this rate was 7.6. Finally, the teen birth rate (number of births per 1000 females ages 15-17) was 34% in Illinois; in Pennsylvania this rate was 22%. Families with children in Pennsylvania made less money in 1997 than similar families in Illinois.[2]

To summarize, we in Pennsylvania confront similar social and educational problems, both in the state and in the major metropolitan areas like Philadelphia and Chicago. These data also clearly indicated that in Illinois, as in Pennsylvania, an organization focusing on advocacy such as you attempt to do, is much needed. Urgent public educational messages on how to care for, nurture, and educate the children are extremely important for the parents and

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[1]Parenthetically, wages were relatively low for child care workers and preschool teachers in both states in 1997: $7.34 and $9.16 per hour, respectively, in Illinois--the average worker earned $12.17 per hour in Illinois; $6.63 and $7.98, respectively, in Pennsylvania, where the average worker earned $11.60.

[2]In Illinois the median income of families with children was $48,800; in Pennsylvania the comparable figure was $47,200. Generally, the figures for both states were very similar to those of the nation as a whole, with one exception: The national median income of families with children was $43,400.

other caregivers of both Illinois and Pennsylvania children.

No discussion of school readiness today can fail to note the interconnections between family poverty, child physical and psychological health status, and academic achievement in the kindergarten and primary grades. Given what we as researchers and practitioners know about the long-term educational and social implications, as soon as possible, but definitely within the next quarter century, low birth-weight and infant mortality rates should be set at 0.0 percent, as should the percent of children in poverty and the percent of children under age 5 in poverty.

Defining "Keynote Address"

When I was invited to keynote, I was asked to address the relationship between early childhood development and school readiness. Now, since I was educated at the University of Chicago, I learned early in my academic life (while still an adolescent girl aged 16 to be exact) how essential and important it can be to strive to clarify definitions and terms pertaining to one's experiences! Therefore, when I agreed to give the opening keynote for this highly significant conference in the history of early childhood pedagogy and policy, I turned first to sources of conventional wisdom for a definition of "keynote." I wanted to see where my own preferences for use of the term were similar and dissimilar to conventional wisdom about the use of the word.

In Webster's New World and New Riverside Dictionaries, the term "keynote address" is defined as: "An opening speech, as at a

political convention, outlining the issues for discussion." The word "keynote" is referenced as a noun meaning "a central idea"..."the basic idea or ruling principle, as of a speech, policy, etc." The term "keynote speech" is defined as "...a speech, as at a political convention, that sets forth the main line of policy". Further, according to Roget's New Pocket Thesaurus, the noun word "keynote" means "cornerstone, basis; gist; kernel, nub (of an idea)." I am glad that I did this background research. I learned that none of the definitions advanced had the features of what I have found most stimulating about any keynote address, specifically, its potential not just for analysis of core meanings and issues, but also for inspiration relative to implications and future directions.

So in my time here with you, I want to engage in both activities, first to present you with an analysis of where I think research efforts over the years suggest we are, relative to advancing the school readiness agenda among young children, and second, to inspire you to appreciate even more of what you do, and to work harder at it, beginning first and foremost, of course, with the work you will do in the remainder of today's conference.

School Readiness: The First National Education Goal

According to Nord and Griffin (1999): "...The years before children enter formal schooling are especially important in preparing them for school, as is recognized in Goal One of the National Education Goals, which states that 'by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.'...This goal

reminds us that how children do in school is determined in part by things that have happened before they ever set foot in a classroom. Learning more about the family circumstances and educational experiences of children of immigrants during these important early years will enable educators and policy makers to develop better ways of serving these children and their families." (p. 349)

This is the year 2000, and clearly we did not reach this goal, not just in reference to immigrants, but also in reference to older, enduring American sub-cultural populations whose members are disproportionately lower income, and/or living in dense, impoverished inner city or isolated rural areas of the nation. Nonetheless, the goal is an ideal to which we Americans do, and should continue to, strive. In a year 2000 report of a Workshop on Early Childhood Intervention, sponsored by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Medicine, for example, it was concluded: "Notwithstanding the broad range of disciplinary lenses and the diversity of service system perspectives represented. . . participants acknowledged the central importance of three dimensions of child development: (1) self-regulation; (2) the establishment of early relationships; and (3) knowledge acquisition and the development of specific skills." (Shonkoff, J., Phillips, D., & Keilty, B., p. 5)

Importantly, the report also states that: ". . .although participants agreed about the need to rethink what it means to be "ready" for school, they did not agree on a set of evidence-based criteria to inform its measurement. . .participants acknowledged that

relationships exist among early skill acquisition, the mastery of preschool developmental tasks, and later educational achievement . . .the centrality of the family in facilitating early child competence in these areas led naturally to a discussion of family characteristics. . .(for) intervention programs." (pp. 7-8). In summary, I believe the Workshop brought together an interdisciplinary group of researchers and practitioners who jointly concluded that the home environment is the first and broadest context in which children develop the capacity for self-regulation, for establishing productive and supportive relationships, and for learning how to learn, each of which are essential psychological dimensions fortifying conventional definitions of school readiness.

The Home Environment and School Readiness

Of interest to me are the three family characteristics or factors identified by these Workshop participants as most salient for early development: (1) parent-child relationships and interactive styles; (2) family status and function; and (3) cultural values and beliefs.

Now some of us have known for some time, in my case over 30 years to be exact, that the home environment has a significant role in early school achievement! I recently summarized the results of my1968 doctoral dissertation research (data collected in 1965) in a forthcoming article to be published in Educational Psychologist as part of a special issue focusing on the education of urban children.

For this speech, I have excerpted portions of that summary:

". . .Specifically, Evanston enrolled a total of 144 children in the 1965 (Head Start) summer program. From this group 90 separate and distinct families were identified, who met poverty guidelines that today we would characterize as being typical of the 'working poor', and who were also African American. . . Fathers were present in 74% of these homes, and mothers worked in 62% of them, though generally, neither parent had completed high school (mothers averaged 10.8 years of schooling, though the range was from 4-16 years). . .Seven per cent of the 90 families probably received AFDC benefits due to being in the father absence/mother not working category. Of the 90 children . . .45 were male, and 45 female.

Mixed with enthusiasm and high spirits, the Evanston school community embraced its first Head Start program with the professionalism characteristic of its rich tradition in educational quality. Two full time school social workers were assigned to work with children and families. Preschool classrooms were bright, colorful, and full of activities. Children were screened for health and dental problems and referred if indicated. Parents were delighted to participate and to witness children preparing for school--children were typically well-dressed and clean at school arrival for the half day program. During that summer, we interviewed all mothers, conducted classroom observations, and made child behavioral ratings with trained observers. We also individually administered the early version of Caldwell's Preschool Achievement Inventory, and planned to obtain follow-up information on the Metropolitan Readiness Tests at the conclusion of the first kindergarten year. . .assessments of children and mothers were conducted by

independent research assistants, as were ratings by classroom observers and reviewers of obtained maternal and child interview protocols.

(I) found significant, positive correlations between these mothers' reports of the children's early home environments, and the obtained child achievement measures. In particular, mothers who knew the children's preferences and interests; reported using control strategies which were firm, but flexible; and who generally appeared to be 'good' managers at home, had children who were more successful on (all) the performance measures (inclusive of the Binet IQ, administered summer 1965, and the Metropolitan Readiness Tests administered at the end of kindergarten in spring 1966), and who tended to be more favorably rated by both preschool teachers and observers trained in child development (on rating scales emphasizing independence, persistence, and sociability in the classroom).

In that study, it seemed that these more 'individuating' mothers structured the family home environment, and thus induced these outcomes. However, the correlational study did not eliminate the possibility that the more intelligent and well-behaved children evoked more positive maternal attitudes and behaviors. Importantly, when obtained interview information was factored, two factors emerged as significant: (1) the degree of openness, including warmth and communication between the mother and child, as inferred from mothers' reports, and (2) the degree of social isolation of the mother from potentially supportive community resources." (Slaughter & Rubin, in press, pp. 6-7)

By "individuating," I really meant in 1965 that the mother genuinely knew her child as a person, and used that knowledge to be sensitive and responsive to the child's developmental needs. Later, the researches of Alison Clarke-Stewart (1973) and Jean Carew (1980) supported my findings, relative to the importance of sensitive, responsive parenting in early childhood. The studies provided more conclusive evidence on two points: (1) first, both reported studies produced similar findings supportive of the critical importance of parent-child relationships based on in-home observations, rather than maternal interviews, of young children ages 9-36 months; and second, (2) the Clarke-Stewart study clarified causal relationships, by reporting that mothers had a proactive role in children's cognitive-linguistic development, but that children's early social behaviors facilitated the maternal-child bond that ensued to enhance children's social and emotional development.

Social and Educational Policy Issues in Early Childhood

I have been very selective in citing these studies of home environmental influences on early childhood development and learning. I have deliberately mentioned some of the earliest studies, to indicate how consistent scientific research findings have been on this point, spanning at least during my career, a period of over 30 years. Some other studies, including those generated by the late Benjamin Bloom and his students are referenced in a little volume published in 1993 by Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, and Bloom, entitled: The Home Environment and School Learning.

However, public and social policies have not kept pace, insofar as family and educational policies have been routinely introduced, with little attention to the particular developmental and educational needs of both parents and their young children, ages 0 to 8, and more importantly, with little investigation of how the families generally, and parents in particular, understand the meaning of introduced programs and policies.

One dramatic example is illustrated in the findings of Patricia Edwards of Michigan State University (1989, 1994, 1995a, 1995b) when she engaged in literacy training of parents of young African American Head Start children in rural Louisiana in the late 1980s. Edwards observed that she decided to find out what parents understood when kindergarten and first grade teachers told them to "read to their child." She found that parents had many and varied reactions that ranged from being concerned that they could not read themselves, and worrying about that; to opening a book and helping children sound out words; to having little idea what should come first, second, or third in such a "reading" process; to just "opening the book and reading to the end, just to get the job done." (Edwards, 1995, p. 57)

Edwards' experiences during this early training subsequently led her to develop the Parents as Partners in Reading Program, a three-phase, 21-week program in which parents first receive demonstrations or coaching as to how they might read to their children, later engage in shared peer modeling experiences, and

finally are observed in specific parent-child interactions around storybook reading.[3]

In reporting her observations, Edwards stated that parents (usually mothers) indicated they were pleased to finally understand what the school expected of them (Edwards, 1989), and that her work with the primary grade teachers has been designed to help them to understand that parents need help in interpreting teacher directives. She wrote: ". . .Teachers did not seem to take into account that 40 percent of the parents at Donaldsonville were illiterate or semiliterate. Teachers mistook parents' unfamiliarity with the task being asked of them and their lower literacy skills as disinterest in their children's education. The continued demand that caregivers read to their children at home sparked hostility and racial tension between teachers and parents. Each group blamed the other for the children's failures; each felt victimized by the interaction. Children were caught between their two most important educators--their teacher and their parent." (Edwards, 1995a, p. 59)

In summary, we know that the quality of early parent-child relationships is crucial for optimal early development and learning. We also know that social status factors can significantly affect

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[3]The parent portion of this program is similar in spirit to that introduced for prospective teen parents a few years back in Chicago's Public Schools by Dr. Renee Dolezal, also a member of Voices' Steering Committee.

how these relationships are expressed in families. The presence of family poverty or lower income, and limited educational background, in particular, continue to be potent reasons for provision of special supports to American families with children. Through the case studies of educators like Edwards, we begin to understand how these factors often converge and are configured in parenting processes that impact early literacy.

In the concluding portion of this keynote, I would like to address the final family factor identified by the Early Intervention Workshop: Cultural factors. In this instance, I make primarily reference to African Americans as an illustrative example, and continue with the same issue--the relationship between the home environment and school readiness.

Cultural Factors

The Workshop report states: "The importance of culture as a context that shapes human development is another well-established principle recognized by Workshop participants. . .Culture influences child development by creating an environment of values and beliefs that shapes parenting practices, guides socialization, and frames expectations for children. . .Although each of the diverse service streams represented at the workshop acknowledged the central importance of 'cultural competence' as a cornerstone of state-of-the-art practice, much of the underlying science remains to be developed." (Shonkoff, J., Phillips, D., & Keilty, B., 2000, p. 13)

During my research career, I emphasized culturally-

sensitive approaches to intervening with African American parents (e.g., Slaughter, 1983, Slaughter-Defoe, 1993). In addition, I tried to extend available literature to identify some of the key value orientations characteristic of both lower (e.g., Slaughter, 1983) and middle (e.g., Slaughter, Johnson, & Schneider, 1988b) income parents. In both instances, strategies for assessment of parental value orientations were developed and reliably used (e.g., Slaughter, 1996; Slaughter & Schneider, 1986). In at least one study (Slaughter & Anderson, 1988a), the concept of extended family was hypothesized and found to be an effective coping mechanism for buttressing the esteem needs of chronically-ill children (with sickle cell disease).[4]

However, I think it especially important to discuss one particular example of cultural factors, notably, possible cultural differences between the academic home environments of African American and Asian American children. In 1990, Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, and Johnson discussed the dramatically different conceptual perspectives assumed when the home environments of Asian American in contrast to African American children are studied. We observed that efforts are made to account for Asian American school success; in contrast efforts

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[4]A number of other colleagues in the Society for Research in Child Development, particularly those who are members of its Black Caucus, could make similar "scientific" claims.

are most often made to account for African American school failures, and that both approaches seem indicative of cultural stereotyping. in addition, we noted that ". . .little interest has been taken in the preadolescent children of these (Asian) families." (Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990, p. 366) A thorough literature search, for example, revealed only six studies in the area of family and preadolescent achievement socialization.

Although some literature about the socialization of younger children in Asian cultural context is emerging (e.g., Adler, 1998; Tobin, 1989), information is still largely observational and anecdotal. This past summer in Japan, I discovered that mothers in that culture are expected to teach their own children to read before they attend primary/elementary school, and to provide supplemental supports in the primary grades. The culture frowns upon mothers who do not reliably achieve this very important task. Somehow, whether the mother can read herself or not, whether she works outside the home or not, she must manage to fulfill this responsibility using her own highly personal knowledge and individuation of her child to do so. Part of showing one's respect for the child's teacher(s) is to thoroughly prepare the child (i.e., make the child 'ready') for social relations in the school--for becoming a member of a civil group, preparatory to adult citizenship.

My earlier description of the highlights of Edwards' research, suggests how radical a perspective such a view would be in African American culture. In this cultural context, only the teacher is responsible for teaching the child to read; the family is responsible for preparing the child <u>to learn to read from the teacher</u>.

My research and informal observation indicate this view is generally held regardless of familial social status. African Americans have a very long history of attempting to coerce and engage the American educational system to work for them (i.e., to teach their children). This cultural history has resulted, I believe in a complex love-hate attitude toward American education and schooling, alluded to by Edwards' research findings. Ogbu's research (1974) has also pointed to some of the cultural attitudes that may have arisen from this protracted struggle.

I believe, therefore, that it is time for a sea change in African American perspectives on education and schooling--it is time for parents to assume responsibility, as the Asians apparently do, for teaching their own children to read before they go to elementary school. Now what would happen if all the African American children who went to kindergarten could read simple print before they got there?

I know my recommendation carries many implications for suggested changes in African American parenting beliefs and values about teachers and the American educational system. I also know that coordinated social and educational supports would be absolutely essential to achieve such a goal. For example, the concept of education would have to be broadened to include the total community. Nonetheless, I recommend the change, and that their most loyal and genuine supporters, like yourselves, enable parents to make it possible.

Summary and Conclusion

I began with some basic statistical data indicative of the status of children in both of my "home" states: Illinois and Pennsylvania. Advocacy of a type that embraces and encourages interdisciplinary professional collaboration for the purpose of supporting and empowering parents is needed in both states. Therefore, this conference is highly significant.

I continued by discussing the relationship between early childhood development and school readiness. I focused on the contribution of the family home environment to the young child's academic and social skills. Research since the 1960s has served to affirm the importance of early parent-child relationships to children's early development and learning, that is, to children's readiness for school. Increased collaboration since the 1960s between researchers, practitioners, and policy advocates has helped us to understand the interconnections between a young child's physical and psychological status at home, in the family, and performance in the primary grades in school. Thanks to recent expansion of the services of Head Start programs, we as a nation are able to reach more children in poverty prior to school entry than ever before in the history of this nation.

However, we must go further still. Parents, as children's first teachers, must be empowered to feel full responsibility for their children's literacy development and school readiness, and to use the skills and knowledge of teachers and other supportive service providers to realistically concretize their responsibility. This is, without question, the "homework" of all working parents, and my

vision of the relationship between early childhood development and school readiness.

Without your cooperative efforts to work to support and empower parents and families on behalf of their children, this cannot happen, and the children's school achievements will continue to be challenged. Thank you for what you are doing, and will continue to attempt to do: helping parents, schools, and communities to work together to support our beloved children.

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